

**A Study of Participant-Perceived Quality of Online Courses in
the Inaugural Year of a Florida Graduate Educational Leadership Program**

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Abstract

The study surveyed first year graduates of a newly formed graduate educational leadership program and focused quantitatively and qualitatively on collecting data regarding participants' perceptions of quality of online courses in the degree program. Through post program anonymous surveys participants reported they expected to have only an average course experience in online classes and their greatest merit was convenience. On a one to 10 Likert scale, with 1 being lowest expectation for course quality and 10 being highest, data revealed a full four point gain in participants' expectations for quality in online courses (from a five to a nine). Participants reported they enjoyed courses most that were designed to elicit high interaction with the Instructor and others in the course while they were aversive to online experiences where all participants had to meet online at the same time.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the quality of distance-learning courses offered in a Florida graduate educational leadership program's inaugural year, as perceived by program participant graduates.

Rationale and Background

A Florida university recently graduated its first group of students earning Master of Education degrees in Educational Leadership. Approximately half of the courses in the program were online. With such a considerable amount of the total course work being

delivered via distance-learning (DL), it was evident to the Investigator that an evaluation of the online courses should be performed.

The Investigator is the coordinator of the program and an instructor in it, teaching two distance-learning courses and one real-time course. From the Investigator's perspective, after receiving anecdotal feedback from several participants regarding the quality of the online courses, it was evident that variations might exist across the courses offered. Ranges in levels of asynchronous message board interaction, depth and breadth of assignments, course organization, instructor accessibility, provided clarity and feedback, and expectations of time invested by participants seemed apparent.

The effectiveness of DL is dependent on several variables. These include relatively low DL enrollment course numbers, successful program delivery, effective utilization of resources and strategies, degrees of interaction between the instructor and students, the amount of support obtained during the course, and technical considerations which minimize technical obstacles for the student (Roblyer, 2003).

In the spirit of continuous program evaluation and improvement, the Investigator collected data regarding the participant perceived quality of the distance-learning courses in the program. Data retrieved in this particular study from program participants was gleaned for useful information that could be used to refine and improve online courses in the program. The Investigator continues to explore the quality of the online courses in a longitudinal manner.

Data Source

Study participants were 2004 graduates of the program. The program began in January, 2003. Participants typically enrolled in two courses per term. Eleven courses and an internship were completed by 20 participants in the program's first season, typically across six terms.

Terms were eight weeks in length and participants were able to complete the M.Ed. in one academic year. Half of the courses in the program were online. In most cases, participants took one real-time course and one DL course per term. The program had three tracks: School Administration, School Administration with ESOL endorsement, and Higher Education. All students enrolled in eight core courses in the program and four specialty courses, based on their chosen track.

Most School Administration track participants were full-time educators teaching in public schools. All Higher Education track participants were employees of the University, in the first year of the degree program. The real-time courses were offered at two campus sites approximately 30 miles from each other.

All 2004 graduates of the program were contacted by mail and asked to complete an anonymous survey that had been approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Investigator distributed an anonymous survey designed to measure the participant perceived quality of the online courses in the program. The appropriate IRB form was included in the mailing and participants were asked to retain the IRB information.

Method

The study was one of mixed methodology. The Investigator sought quantitative data regarding the participants' perceptions of the merit of online courses before and after participating in them, while seeking qualitative data about online courses liked most and least.

The sample is anonymous, non-random, and convenient. The Investigator mailed questionnaires to all inaugural year program graduates. He then collected and analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively.

Analysis of Data

Based on DL research, there will most likely be a range of perceived quality of online courses in the program across participants. Many factors impact, and shape, perceptions of quality of online courses (Fairchild and Gisburne, 2004). For example, it is known that multicultural issues impact participant-perceived merit of online learning (Morse, 2003).

Additionally, there are unique circumstances evident in graduate online education. Are past studies suggesting that graduate students are less able to demonstrate their skill competencies in online courses accurate? (Kretovics and McCambridge, 2002) Do particular online pedagogical approaches elicit greater levels of perceived quality? Does constructivist methodology with emphases on collaborative exercises, virtual field trips, online evaluations, interactive essays, and group projects make a difference in perceived quality? (Gold, 2001) Do high-interaction asynchronous message boards cause DL participants to perceive it to be worthwhile? These are some of the questions the

Investigator shall explore and attempt to answer through the study's results and conclusions.

Survey Questions

Question 1: Prior to participating in online courses, what was your perception of them?

Answers:

-vague and of a 'low quality'

-My perception of online courses was very low. I felt that the best learning could only be had by actually sitting in a classroom with students and instructor.

-My perception was that online courses were easier and required less interaction than face-to-face courses. I thought online courses were like independent study classes.

-I felt that online courses would be very convenient, but would contain a larger and more difficult work load.

-I thought the online courses might have been more convenient, yet challenging.

-My perception of an online course was they are designed for students who cannot participate in a "traditional" classroom because of time constraints, etc.

Prior to the program graduates' participation in online courses, there was a consensus that online courses existed mainly for the sake of convenience and perceptions of their merit and worth were mixed.

Question 2: If you were to rank your expectations for online courses (with 10 representing high expectations and 1 representing low expectations) prior to your participating in them, what would the ranking of your expectations for online courses be?

Mean= 5

Median=6

Mode=6

N=6

Respondents had average expectations for online courses, before experiencing them.

Question 3: Now that you have participated in online courses, what is your perception of them?

-the 'on-line' courses offered at Lynn were both comprehensive and challenging- filled with rich content and interaction

-10+ The online experiences at Lynn University are thought provoking and highly educational.

-I think it's possible to have quality education and high levels of interaction in online courses. My expectations are now very high. However, I must admit that teaching style and techniques used in these courses have a great impact in the learning experience.

-I found that online courses are very convenient. I also found that the work load was different than that of traditional courses and took a bit more time.

-I think that I learned so much more in comparison to traditional courses. I had to invest so much more time and had a great commitment to my coursework.

-I enjoy the concept of online courses. However, I found that not all faculty are meant to teach online courses. I have had faculty who teach online courses like they are in the classroom. They demand you log on at a certain time and day, although it may be impossible for you to participate. This was very disappointing.

Respondents generally found their online courses to be challenging and convenient. Some participants perceived differences in quality of online courses across

program instructors and instructional style. A respondent was upset about DL convenience being obscured by being required to be online at particular times and days.

Question 4: If you were to rank your experiences with online courses (with 10 representing very positive experiences and 1 representing very negative experiences) after your participation in them, what would the ranking of your experiences with online courses be?

Mean= 9

Median= 9.5

Mode= 10

N=6

Respondents had very positive experiences in the online courses.

(It should be noted that the mean score of perceived quality of online courses reported after experiencing them was 4 points higher, on a 10 point scale) than the mean score of preconceived perceptions of online course quality.)

Question 5: What did you like most about your online course experiences?

-excellent interaction with fellow students and faculty

-I felt as if I was in a traditional classroom setting. I interacted with the students and the instructor. In fact, I felt that I had direct access to the instructor- that doesn't always occur on land!

-I liked the immediate feedback given by some instructors, and the flexibility to interact with a selected number of students. Additionally, as a working professional, I enjoyed the choice of time devoted for the course.

-I liked the fact that I was able to do any and all of the work when I chose to do it, so I did not lose any family time.

-I liked the convenience of being able to do my assignments and participated at my leisure. I liked the feeling of being able to express myself without being judged by my appearance- the anonymity of what I look like.

-The professors who were knowledgeable in the online delivery method made you feel like you were part of a “traditional” (class) and were able to break the stereotype of online classes being impersonal and nonacademic.

Respondents enjoyed the interaction with fellow participants and program instructors. Convenience was mentioned in several instances. Being able to log on day or night to participate was valued. Participants reported that they were able to better manage other elements of their lives (families), when enrolled in online courses.

Anonymity provided opportunities for a respondent to not be judged by their appearance, as perhaps they would be in a real-time class. A respondent shared that some program instructors are able to provide online courses that feel like traditional courses, possessing personalized learning approaches and academically challenges, better than others. They shared that such designs dispel myths about online courses being “impersonal and nonacademic.”

Question 6: Which online course was your favorite? What caused this course to be your favorite?

-Technology- because I have a genuine interest in this particular field.

-EDU 635- The professor was up to date with the subject matter and provided 100% support and communication on the topic.

-Technology. I had little experience when I began, but exited with not only experience but actual knowledge that I will continue to use in life.

-I had two courses that (I) enjoyed equally, curriculum and technology. Both of them were dynamic and the instructor provided immediate feedback. For example, every week I completed my assignments and submitted a week's (e-mail) reflection. The instructor then would e-mail me the points earned for the week as well as any concerns or areas of improvement. This feedback was provided on-time for me to make improvements for the next assignment.

-I enjoyed the online courses where we conversed with a few classmates, not all of them. This allowed for feedback without being overwhelmed.

-I think the courses I took right after my first online were my favorite because I was acclimated to what I was doing.

Respondents' favorite online courses were ones in which they had a genuine interest, and where the professors were up to date in the subject matter and provided complete support and communication. Immediate feedback by the instructor was cited as a reason for a course being identified as a favorite by two respondents. E-mail reflections, and timely feedback in e-mail replies following each week's online experience, was cited as causing a course to be a participant favorite. Prescribing the number of posts to read in asynchronous discussions and numbers of replies to fellow participants (clarity) was also reported as a reason for a particular course to be a respondent's favorite. Acclimation to the online experience caused a respondent to report their favorite course(s) being those that followed the initial one. Beyond subject interest and instructor subject knowledge, online interaction and timely feedback from online instructors were the variables impacting selections of favorite online courses most.

Question 7: What did you like least about your online course experiences?

-my 'slow' internet connection

-Professors providing little feedback and expecting you to participate at times convenient to them.

-I least liked when Blackboard was down.

-Reading through the "course information," "course documents," and "assignments."

It would be easier to have one central document to read, like in face-to-face courses.

Students must read the syllabus ONLY to find information on assignments, deadlines, etc.

-I did not like replying to every student in the class. I felt this took away much of the joy and positive values of the assignment.

-I did not like the virtual classroom because so many people wanted to "talk," but it did not make sense on screen due to the overflow of texting.

Some respondents least liked having to be online at particular times, rather than any time day or night within a prescribed time window. Within these concerns, the virtual classroom was mentioned because of "the overflow of texting" (i.e. chat). Lack of feedback from the instructor was also cited as a least favorite element of online learning. Online participants reported getting off track when the instructor was absent from facilitating online discussions. Segregating course information across several areas of the online course rather than having all information in one central location was cited as a least favorite aspect. Also, technical problems (slow internet service providers and Blackboard going down) were cited as least favorite aspects of the experience.

Question 8: Which online course was your least favorite? What caused this course to be your least favorite?

-‘course name omitted by Investigator _____?’- the very first course I took at Lynn. I didn’t know what to expect, how exactly how to participate effectively, etc.

-EDU XXX (Course number omitted by Investigator)- The format (of) how the instructor set up the class made it boring for participants. Not much interaction.

EDU XXX (Course number omitted by Investigator)- This was an instructor who made you log on and participate on a certain day and time of the week, even though this defeats the premise of an online course.

-I am sorry. I enjoyed all of my online courses.

-(Course name omitted by Investigator) course. I felt that students were just posting answers to questions, and in most cases, they did not address the question. The instructor provided very little feedback or clarification. Therefore, I did not know what was accurate. Additionally, the virtual classroom discussions were not organized.

-I forget the names, but the class in which I never got to meet the students face to face and had to reply to all students.

-The least favorite was my initial course because most students enrolled were in the PhD program while I was only at Masters Level. The workload was tremendous.

Some respondents cited courses that were their least favorite as those they had early in their online program experience. Courses with low interaction, required synchronous (same time) participation, little clarity and feedback, and those poorly organized were identified as least favorite. One respondent apologized for enjoying all of the online courses, when they were asked to identify one(s) they liked least. The need to assign the number of initial posts to read and the number of replies, and replies to replies, to provide in the discussion forums was again mentioned.

Question 9: Please provide any additional information you would like to share regarding the quality of online courses in your graduate program.

-the more I became in tune with the mechanics of the courses, the better my overall experience(s)

-I feel full time faculty of the university should not be teaching online courses unless they have extensive training and they truly want to teach that delivery method (online). Faculty need to understand the different needs between “traditional” learners and “online” learners.

-I like it best when the instructor is a constant online. When left to our own devices, we the class tend to get off kilter and often off topic. The instructor should continually guide the class in the direction of discovery and success.

-I had the best learning experience when:

+Instructor provided weekly individual feedback and explained the criteria for awarding points.

+Grades were provided with enough time for students to know what areas need to be improved in the next assignment.

+Instructors were respectful and sensitive to students.

+Interaction with other students was limited to half of them or only a few (I was not required to reply to every student).

-I felt it was a great idea to meet as a class once. This way everyone has a chance to see and visualize who they are communicating with.

-I think the online courses have definitely gotten better through time. I noticed a great difference from my first course online. Just like anything it takes time to perfect, but Lynn is very student centered and has done a fabulous job so far.

Additional comments and suggestions by respondents, when prompted, included the notion that when students become more familiar with online courses their experience improves. A respondent also mentioned that the program's online courses have "gotten better" over time. It was suggested that faculty should be extensively trained in online instruction and they should possess a real desire to teach online if they are going to do it. Having the instructor available online most of the time is valued. Respondents also need timely feedback and clarity regarding how they are doing and what they must do in future assignments. Weekly e-mail interactions between individual students and the instructor were mentioned as being something that enhances clarity. Faculty displaying sensitivity and respect for online students were also mentioned as being important. Meeting in real-time at the beginning of the term, to begin an online course, was mentioned as something that should be included because it helps participants connect faces with names. A respondent identified Lynn University as being student-centered and mentioned that Lynn is doing a fabulous job in its online program.

Conclusions

Prior to the program graduates' participation in online courses, there was a consensus that online courses were mainly for the sake of convenience and perceptions of their merit and worth were mixed. Respondents had average expectations for online courses.

Respondents generally found their online courses in the program to be challenging and convenient. Some participants perceived differences in quality of online courses across program instructors and instructional styles. A respondent was upset about DL convenience being obscured by a requirement to be online at particular times and days. Generally, respondents had very positive experiences in the online courses.

Respondents enjoyed the interaction with fellow participants and program instructors. Convenience was mentioned in several instances. Being able to log on day or night to participate was valued. Participants reported that they were able to better manage other elements of their lives, when enrolled in online courses.

Anonymity provided opportunities for a respondent to not be judged by their appearance, as perhaps they would be in a real-time class. A respondent shared that some program instructors were able to provide online courses that feel like traditional courses, possessing personalized learning approaches and academic challenges, better than others. They shared that such designs dispel myths about online courses being “impersonal and nonacademic.”

Respondents' favorite online courses were ones in which they had a genuine interest, and where the professors were up to date in the subject matter, highly communicative, and accessible. Immediate feedback by the instructor was cited as a reason for a course being identified as a favorite by respondents. E-mail reflections and timely feedback in e-mail replies, following each week's online experiences, were cited as causing a course to be a favorite. Prescribing the number of posts to read in asynchronous discussions and numbers of replies to fellow participants was reported as a reason for a particular course to be a respondent's favorite. Acclimation to the online experience caused a respondent

to report their favorite course(s) being those that followed the initial one. Beyond subject interest and instructor subject knowledge, online interaction and timely feedback seemed to be the variables impacting selections of favorite online courses most.

Some respondents least liked having to be online at particular times, rather than any time day or night within a prescribed time window. Within these concerns, the virtual classroom was mentioned because of “the overflow of texting” i.e. chat. Lack of feedback from the instructor was also cited as a least favorite element of online learning. Segregating course information across several areas of the online course rather than having all information in one central location was cited as a least favorite aspect. Also, technical problems (slow internet service providers and Blackboard going down) were cited as least favorite aspects of the experience.

Respondents cited courses that were their least favorite as those they had early in their online program experience. Courses with low interaction or required synchronous (same time) participation, little clarity and feedback, and those poorly organized were identified as least favorite. One respondent apologized for enjoying all of the online courses, when asked to identify one(s) they liked least. The need to assign the number of initial posts to read and the number of replies, and replies to replies, to provide in the discussion forums was again mentioned.

Additional comments and suggestions by respondents, when prompted, included the notion when students become more familiar with online courses their experience improves. A respondent also mentioned that the program’s online courses have “gotten better” over time. It was suggested that faculty should be extensively trained in online instruction and should possess a desire to teach online if they are going to do it. Having

the online instructor available online most of the time is valued. Respondents also need timely feedback and clarity regarding how they are doing and what they must do in future assignments. Weekly e-mail interactions between individual students and the instructor were mentioned as being something that enhances clarity. The need for faculty to display sensitivity and respect for online students was also mentioned. Meeting in real-time at the beginning of the term, to begin an online course, was mentioned as something that should be included because it helps participants connect faces with names. A respondent identified the university as being student-centered and mentioned that it is doing a fabulous job in its online program.

Recommendations

Per the data and results, parties interested in enhancing the perceived quality of online courses among program participants should consider theory derived from the study:

- People who have not experienced online courses believe such courses exist for convenience and possess only average quality in their academic offerings and challenges.
- People participating in effective online courses find them to be challenging and convenient.
- As online program participants travel through a program, their comfort level with online courses increases.
- Online participants must have a fast and reliable Internet Service Provider (ISP) and possess computer hardware and software that is compatible with the online software.
- Blackboard (the online course delivery system provided by the university) must be accessible all of the time.

- Instructors should design and facilitate online discussion forums where all course participants actively post and reply during a prescribed time window of a few days, rather than requiring course participants to all be online on certain days at certain times.
- Online courses with low interaction or required synchronous (same time) participation, little clarity and feedback, and those poorly organized were identified as least favorites.
- Online instructors should have all course information available in one central location in the online course site, rather than dividing the information across several different areas of the site.
- Instructor's prescribing the number of posts to read in asynchronous discussions and numbers of replies to provide to fellow participants was reported as a reason for a particular course to be a respondent's favorite. Avoid merely telling online participants to reply to all posts.
- Being able to log on day or night to complete course work allows participants to balance their online course work with other life demands and is greatly valued.
- Online course participants enjoy interacting with fellow course members and the instructor in discussion forums.
- Respondents' favorite online courses were ones in which they had a genuine interest, where the professors were up to date in the subject matter and provided complete support and communication.
- Timely feedback from, and online accessibility of, the instructor are reasons given for selecting particular online courses as participant favorites.
- Some online participants value the anonymity of online discussions and activities. They report they have been unfairly judged by appearance in real-time courses and their

opinions are often subordinated based on their appearance. In online courses, participants can't typically judge others by appearance.

- Lack of feedback from the instructor was cited as a least favorite element of online learning. Online participants need more feedback and clarity than students taught in real-time from instructors.
- One respondent apologized for enjoying all of the online courses, when they were asked to identify one(s) they liked least. Another praised the program for continually improving the online courses.
- Faculty should be extensively trained in online instruction and they should possess a real desire to teach online if they are going to do it.
- Online instructors should consider providing real-time orientations to kickoff online courses.
- Having the online instructor available online most of the time is greatly valued by online students.
- Weekly e-mail interactions between individual students and the instructor enhance clarity in online course experiences.
- Feedback regarding how an online participant can improve upon course work should be conveyed electronically to the students in a timely manner, in order for the student(s) to have time to improve in the next online episode.

The derived theory shall be tested by the Investigator in subsequent annual program evaluations of participants' perceptions of the merit and worth of online courses. It is anticipated that while gathering data regarding the theory, in future evaluations, more theory will emerge.

Limitations

There are many variables impacting participant perceived quality of online graduate courses. The perceptions of participants in a particular program are limited to, and by, their experiences and opinions. Still, the data retrieved from an inaugural group of participants in a graduate program, and subsequent groups, can inform and shape future seasons of the program's life. Justification for conducting the study (program evaluation leading to improvement) outweighs any argument not to consider data retrieved from such a sample. Perceptions of the program participants, regarding the merit and worth of online courses, provide a valuable, additional way of seeing the program.

Just how important are the opinions of the program participants? Another study limitation might be that the value of perceptions of program participants should not necessarily be used as the gold standard to alter the program (Trindade, Carmo, & Bidarra, 2000). Perceptions of all stakeholders in online programs should be sought and considered, in the Investigator's opinion.

Implications

Can program participants' perceptions of online courses in a graduate Educational Leadership program provide substantive data leading to effective program evaluation and improvement? Yes, probably. Are some pedagogical approaches more effective than others in online courses? This seems to be the case. Can certain online teaching

approaches overcome reported online graduate students' inabilities to demonstrate skill sets and build interpersonal relationships with online instructors? It's highly likely.

How do the findings in this particular study compare with other recent studies in this area? Results from other studies regarding the merit of high interaction online course experiences among students who are geographically distant parallel this study's results (Moffett, 2003, 2002, 2001). High-interaction message boards connect distant students. Education technology theorists promote high-interaction asynchronous online experiences with relatively low participant enrollment numbers (15 or fewer), instructor accessibility, timely feedback, and encourage participant ability to access and work in the course day or night (Roblyer, 2003). Online participants believe DL offers new possibilities of academic quality and challenge in graduate education.

For more information, go to <http://groups.msn.com/DrDavidMoffett>

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